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"AN ANALYSIS OF PERSONALITY CORRELATES OF STIGMA VULNERABILITY AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS ON PREDOMINANTLY EURO-AMERICAN CAMPUSES"

Dorie J. Gilbert, Ph.D.

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"This session should particularly benefit individuals involved with college retention programs, counseling and guidance and anyone interested in a deeper understanding of racial tensions on college campuses."

Stigma vulnerability is defined as the tendency for socially stigmatized individuals perceive prejudice against their group as an explanation for negative interpersonal outcome in ambiguous situations (Gilbert, 1998). Contrary opinions about African Americans "over-attributing" negative outcomes in their lives to prejudice has gained attention in recent years. Nowhere is the raging debate about this more evident than on college campuses. While most accounts indicate that hate mail, racist graffiti, verbal abuse, journalistic attacks are on the rise, others argue that any racial tensions are more a psychological creation exaggerated by black students. Steele (1990; 1998) proposed that black students' feelings of inferiority are transformed into a "white menace," magnifying the prevalence of racism to a system problem as opposed to the acts of a few students.

Empirical studies have documented perceptions of prejudice experienced by African-American students. In a cross-cultural study, American-American students were more likely than were students from all other ethnicities to indicate the perception of both past and future ethnic identity barriers to their academic and career development (Luzzo, 1993). Studies have documented the perception by African-American students that Whites in the educational milieu evaluate them with a certain lack of objectivity. Researchers empirically observed that in cross-racial, teacher-student situations, African-American students were substantively more sensitive to negative evaluations from White professors and perceived than as assessing their performance less favorably than teachers of their own race (Coleman, Jussim & Isaac, 1991). Ninety black undergraduates participated in experimental, laboratory study in which a black or white male teacher expressed one of five evaluative feedback responses to students. Black students tended to react to negative feedback by perceiving White teachers to hold inaccurate and generally unfavorable impressions of their skills and motivation. More specifically, findings indicated that whereas black students perceived black evaluators to be equally objective when giving positive or negative feedback, they perceived White evaluators as being less objective when expressing negative feedback than when expressing positive feedback. Other researchers have found that, given hypothetical cross-racial situations, some African-American university students exhibited tendencies of attributing negative and positive feedback to prejudice in laboratory, experimental settings. In summarizing, the researchers stated what many others have also concluded: that black students and many blacks, in general, "exists in a state of attributional ambiguity regarding feedback,

positive or negative, when received from white peers" (Crocker, et al., 1991, p. 225).

The unfortunate consequences of such perceptions is that "the more differential treatment black students perceive, the more unfairly will some black students perceive, the more unfairly will some black students view their treatment and the less motivated and cooperative they may become in class" (Coleman, et al., 1991, p. 477).

Unfortunately, this ambivalence leads to difficulty in assessing one's own abilities, hopelessness in cross-racial interactions, and, notable, the psychological trauma of having to assess, one a day-to-day basis, what role, if any, racial prejudice plays in the feedback one receives. Given such concerns, the underlying question of this research explored what variables might explain why some African-American students exhibit more stigma vulnerability than others.

The subjects for this study were 109 African-American students from two predominately Euro-American campuses: one a large university setting; the other a community college. The dependent variable, stigma vulnerability, was measured by the newly-devised Prejudice Perception Assessment Scale (Gilbert, 1998). The PPAS is a self-administered, 5-item, like-type scale that allows subjects to respond to five hypothetical vignettes aimed at assessing the extent to which subjects tend to perceive prejudice as the cause of negative outcomes in their lives. The study employed regression analyses to explore four-personality variables-self-esteem, ethnic-group schematicity, locus of control, and resiliency-as possible correlates of stigma vulnerability. Overall findings suggest that defining one's self-concept around membership in a socially-stigmatized group and tending to have an external, as opposed to internal, locus of control appears to increase one's propensity to attribute negative outcomes to prejudice against one's group in ambiguous situations. This study's results suggest that defining one's self-concept around membership in an ethnic group (i.e., being ethnic group schematic versus aschematic) and external locus of control are better predictors of stigma vulnerability. Resiliency, when analyzed in a bivariate regression, had a significant effect on decreasing stigma vulnerability. College setting, age, gender, school rank, socioeconomic background, and geographical background were not good predictors of stigma vulnerability.

Implications of the findings for counseling, retention programs, and campus race relations will be discussed. This session should particularly benefit individuals involved with college retention programs, counseling and guidance and anyone interested in a deeper understanding of racial tensions on college campuses.

Presenter:

Dorie J. Gilbert, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Gilbert's scholarly work addresses the impact of social stigma on human development and adaptation. Her current scholarly and research interests include psychosocial adjustment in persons coping with social stigma (ethnic/minority students on predominantly Euro-American campuses, gay/lesbian issues, women, and persons living with HIV/AIDS, etc.). Dr. Gilbert has also been recognized nationally by the Council on Social Work Education for her exemplary course curriculum for teaching cultural diversity. Dr. Gilbert has published numerous articles, book chapters, and

provided national presentations addressing her topics of interest.